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NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF NATIONAL NAMES AUTHORITIES

Taking geonames into the next millennium: legislative and administrative changes to geographical naming in Victoria

Paper submitted by Australia**

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Governments world-wide have moved out of the provision of all but core public sector roles, transferring to other levels of government, the private sector, or the community, management of a wide range of administrative processes and public services.

Reduction in central government activity has been to a large extent enabled by developments in communication and information management technology, which have effectively reduced the distance between communities, individuals and government agencies.

These changes have been reflected in the sphere of land information services, mapping, and geographic names.

In Australia, the Victorian State Government has recently reviewed its approach to the standardisation and collection of geographic place names. The new system which delegates to local governing or administering agencies the investigation and assignment of place and feature names, effects both the streamlining of regulation, and makes the best use of new technology in the pursuit of greater community access and involvement.

A new position of Registrar of Geographic Names, is designed to undertake a much more proactive and strategic approach to the management and future development of the function, than the previous Standing Committee. The changes allow policy, procedures and guidelines to be promulgated on the Internet and other information technology communication mechanisms, including direct links to the State Digital Map Base. Access to the Gazetteer and associated information will similarly be available to the general community.

BACKGROUND

The contemporary trend of governments world-wide has been to focus on the core functions of the public sector and to transfer to more appropriate levels of community activity and governance, a range of previously centralised roles and bureaucratic processes. Recent, and very significant advances in communication and information management technology, have facilitated these fundamental changes in the relationship of government to the private, community and household sectors. The delivery of all forms of government services have been revolutionised, placing communities and citizens in more direct contact with, and in control of, decision making processes affecting their social life and development.

These changes have also been reflected in the sphere of land information, mapping, and geographic place names. In 1995 the Victorian Government commissioned a complete review of the administrative structures and processes for the determination and collection of geographic names, the existing Place Names Committee having been in operation since 1966, without any review of policy and functions. The system established in legislation in 1965, was very centralised, reflecting the pressing requirements of the developing State and National mapping upgrade program, for coordination of place names standardisation.

The mapping context for the geographic names function has changed considerably since that post-war reconstruction/redevelopment phase. The State is mapped and the issues now focus on the emerging needs of users and stakeholders, and those of local community interest - tradition and historical links. While central regulation of the geographic naming process was clearly in the public interest in this earlier period, reform of regulatory processes has been a concern of both State and Commonwealth governments for the past decade. The Victorian Government has given a particularly high profile to identifying alternative means for achieving social and economic goals, and to reducing the regulatory burden on the community.

Analysis of a two year period of the activities of the Place Names Committee revealed a considerable overlap of processes and decision making between the central standing committee and local government and other public authorities. It became evident, that devolution of the investigation, consultation and determination of geographic names, would both return control of place and feature naming, to the local community, and would free up scarce resources at central level, to provide more proactive services to users and beneficiaries of standardisation and collection of the state's place names. The proposal to delegate naming authority to local bodies, mainly local municipalities, has had the effect of focussing on the key goals of state government in geographic name management.

The public interest aspects of the provision of 'official' standardised geographic names fall in to two main categories:-

- Instrumental objectives
- Cultural/spiritual/heritage objectives.

The key roles for central government in approving names for the official record, include :-

- Establishment of a ***statutory decision process*** for the determination and assignment of ***official place names*** to ensure the ***effective communication and unambiguous use*** of geographic names for purposes of, public safety; commerce and development; community service provision;
- Development and approval of ***standardisation policy*** which guides naming decisions and preserves cultural and heritage values.

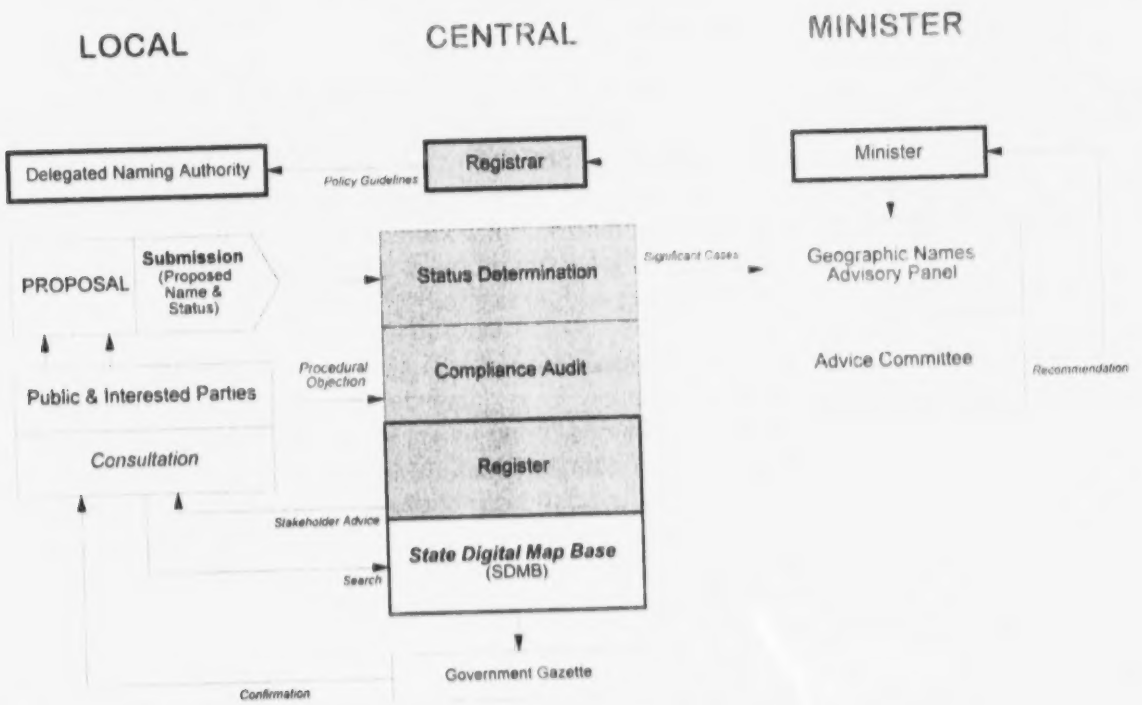
The review process also focussed on the evolving **requirements of the users** (customers), and beneficiaries of standardised and collated geographic names data. Emergency Service Organisations (ESO's), now using sophisticated technology and communication systems, have greatly increased demands for **real-time data** which is accurate, up to date and complete to much **greater levels of detail** than previously. Community service and dispatch organisations are particularly interested in the clear **definition of boundaries** of places and localities for administration and planning purposes. Historical and community groups, also have **enhanced expectations of access** to place names information, and there is a growing interest and awareness of the **importance of indigenous names** in Australia's cultural heritage and a new dimension of importance growing out of changes to policy on Native Title at State and National level.

VICNAMES - THE PROPOSED NEW ARRANGEMENTS

Legislation has been drafted, which places less emphasis on coordination and centralisation. It gives powers to the Minister responsible for geographic naming, to approve names assigned by local governing bodies, for the official record and to approve policy guidelines. Under the legislation the Minister can delegate decision making and policy development, which is to be managed by a Registrar of Geographic Names. There is no longer a statutory standing committee; this has been replaced by an advisory panel of wide-ranging expertise (Geographic Names Advisory Panel), whose members are available to form a select committee for specific purposes. This concept is designed to ensure a more flexible process; one capable of providing to the Minister/Registrar a depth of technical knowledge and policy advice on matters ranging from:-

- mapping/geography
- toponomy
- land information data management and service provision
- local government administration
- aboriginal culture and language
- orthography and linguistics
- heritage and history

This group will be convened as required to comment and advise on the naming of significant places or features which cross boundaries and/or which have an affiliation for a wider group of Victorians than the local or regional population. In addition to maintaining an available panel of expertise for these special cases, the Registrar of Geographic Names will facilitate the involvement of members of this panel and other stakeholders in policy development and the refining of administrative procedures to meet user and community requirements most effectively.



GEOGRAPHIC NAMES - NEW ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE

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The key organisational changes in the new approach are the shift from a technical/functional to a regional basis for management and decision making and the delegation of maximum feasible authority for geographic naming to the local level. This makes Local Government Authorities an important part of the system. Probably the most significant impact, is to make **LGA's a critical component of the emergency response cycle**, in relation to the provision and update of land information, for disaster planning and emergency service provision.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES IN A DELEGATED SYSTEM

Geographic place names are a significant element of the total land information service provided by Land Victoria. This service is being redeveloped, to provide by the year 2002, more accessible, integrated and affordable land information through convenient electronic services. Information relating to an area or specific property covering anything from property boundaries and values, rates, local health networks, geological conditions, road networks, planning restrictions, vegetation, weather will be available. Geographic names data will be part of this more visible and accessible system.

It is important for efficient and timely update of geospatial data sets, that a greater awareness and knowledge of the issues related to geographic place names is developed at local level, as this is the point at which additions or alterations to, critical land information,(locality/feature names, street naming/addressing, sub-division creation) takes place. The land information data system will be collated and updated with the assistance of local government authorities, and will provide a valuable service to local governing and administering bodies.

The new computer based land information and management system will provide significant resources and information to support delegated agencies and the general community in the processes of altering or applying new locality or feature names. Procedures for assigning or altering geonames, will be simpler and easier to use. A delegated system, which is based on locally informed decision making and more effective tapping of local knowledge and community preferences, will reduce unnecessary duplication and free central resources to provide better community information and concentrate on improvements to services provided by the gazetteer.

A major advantage of the new arrangements will be, the refocussing of resources on strategic aspects of the Geonames function, specifically integration of names data with the digital map base for Victoria and associated data management issues and the development of the *VicNames* web site and gazetteer.

The Registrar of Geographic Names will also facilitate policy development processes based on regional and local needs but contexted by the requirements of the wider range of stakeholders in the geospatial information collection/collation and dissemination system.

IMPLEMENTING THE NEW SYSTEM

Implementation of this shift of core activities to the local government environment will ensure attention to all necessary support mechanisms. The Minister/Registrar will need to be assured and confident, that a quality process has occurred at local level and that decisions have been made with full community participation based on the best knowledge and have achieved a wide consensus.

Delegated agencies will be effectively informed/briefed/resourced. Toponymic information on standardisation principles and policies, needs to be able to be communicated easily in user friendly and engaging language, with a minimum of 'official jargon'. New procedures have been designed to be simple and easy to carry out, (a minimum of paperwork, checking points etc), digital lodgement being the final goal for implementation of the system. Development of on-line information systems and the *VicNames* web page will include the capacity for notice of name changes or assignment to be available for community comment and a kit of information required for anyone responsible for, or interested in the process.

Scoping the new position of Registrar, is an important aspect of implementation planning. It is anticipated that the Registrar will operate as manager of the gazetteer and data base processes, facilitating forums for policy and procedures review and development, including:-

- Briefing/feedback forums with delegated agencies on a cyclic basis
- Indigenous names policy development
- Specific historical collection projects
- Customer groups - Emergency response, Tourism bodies, National Parks, Historical associations, Academic institutions etc
- Geospatial Information provider groups - Data base /Gazetteer structuring and management.

CONCLUSION

Delegation of the geographic naming function has a number of benefits. It is highly suitable for wider application, including those jurisdictions still with a mapping program to complete. It ensures that the Register/Gazetteer is available to the general community, and promotes and supports the maximum involvement of local communities and governing bodies.

Modern communications and information management technology enables the streamlining and devolution of decision processes which this delegated model utilises, and in this offers the attraction of supporting a number of United Nations resolutions regarding the management of the standardisation of geographic naming.